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AUTHOR Mullis, Ina V. S.
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ABSTRACT

In 1983-84, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) administered a 15-task writing assessment in grades 4, 8, and 11. The tasks involved informative, persuasive, and imaginative writing, and were evaluated at one of four levels of success: unsatisfactory; rudimentary or minimal performance; satisfactory; or detailed and controlled performance. In the informative or explanatory task, one-fourth of the fourth and over half of the eighth and eleventh graders were rated as satisfactory or higher. In another explanatory writing task, over half of the fourth graders were unable to perform the task, but 80-85 percent of the eighth and eleventh graders achieved satisfactory or better results. In a persuasive writing task, four percent of the fourth, 14 percent of the eighth, and 21 percent of the eleventh graders wrote adequately and extensively supported essays. In an imaginative writing exercise about ghosts, 86 percent of the fourth, 91 percent of the eighth, and 95 percent of the eleventh graders achieved satisfactory or better results. Ratings on another imaginative exercise were lower. The 1986 NAEP will include reading, mathematics, science, computers, United States history, and literature. (GDC)

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NAEP Perspectives on Literacy: A Preview of 1983-84 Writing Assessment Results, the Young Adult Literacy Assessment and Plans for 1986

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Ina V. S. Mullis
National Assessment of Educational Progress
Educational Testing Service
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Until recently, literacy was viewed as the attainment of very basic reading and writing skills. In the early part of this century, measures of literacy frequently involved reading a simple paragraph aloud or signing one's name. Today the variety of perspectives evidenced about literacy and the burgeoning number of "literacies" discussed make measuring literacy a very complex task.

While most people concerned about levels of literacy attainment concur that literacy rates should be improved and that some kind of basic reading and writing skills are essential to literacy, agreement is less widespread about what else may be required to be literate. Some discussions link literacy to communication demands and thus also encompass the language skills of speaking and listening. Others broaden the scope still further, sensibly arguing that you should know enough to comprehend what you read or to contribute to a conversation, and this often requires some understanding of mathematics, science, history, literature, and/or computers. Thus, we have heard of scientific literacy, cultural literacy and computer literacy as well as their

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relations, oracy and numeracy. Finally, neither those who keep their definitions pure and include only the use of written materials nor those taking wider points of view can agree as to the level of skill attainment necessary to be literate. It may be the minimum required by the demands of one's own home, job, social and civic situation; it may be the level necessary to improve that situation if one so desires; or it may be a standard based on expectations of employers and the demands of living in today's society.

The point is that whatever your view may be about literacy, NAEP will probably be able to provide you with pertinent information. In 1983-84, the fourth reading and writing assessments were administered to nearly 100,000 4th, 8th and 11th graders and those results are being analyzed. This April (1985) we begin conducting our assessment to provide the literacy attainment of young adults ages 21-24 and the groundwork is well in place to conduct the 1986 in-school assessment of reading, mathematics, science, computers, as well as basic knowledge of United States history and literature.

Although the bulk of NAEP data will be released beginning this summer, the remainder of this paper presents some preliminary findings from the 1983-84 writing assessment, describes the young adult literacy assessment and highlights plans for 1986.

Writing Achievement and Instruction: Some Results from 1983-84

The writing assessment included 15 tasks at each grade/age level requiring performance on a range of informative, persuasive and imaginative writing. Responses to all tasks were evaluated using the Primary Trait system

in which readers categorize papers as to degree of success in accomplishing the required writing task. Guides tailored to each task generally specify four levels of success:

- o Unsatisfactory analysis--little or no evidence of accomplishing the task
- o Minimal analysis--rudimentary evidence
- o Satisfactory analysis--solid performance
- o Elaborated analysis--detailed and controlled performance.

NAEP hopes to scale the writing data to provide results similar to those from the reading assessment. Additionally, trend data will be available, and reassessed items were also evaluated holistically as well as analyzed for syntax, grammar and mechanics. However, the preliminary results presented below are percentages obtained from the Primary Trait evaluation of the 1983-84 papers.

Informative or Explanatory Writing

Informative or explanatory writing covers the range from reporting or retelling events to analyzing concepts and relationships. The 1983-84 writing assessment included a range of tasks, with the results of the two tasks reported in Table 1 indicating the ends of the continuum.

Table 1. NAEP 1983-84 Results on Two Informative/Explanatory Writing Tasks

APPLEBY HOUSE; BRIEF NEWSPAPER REPORT BASED ON A LIST OF FACTS.

GRADE	NONRATEABLE*	UNSATISFACTORY REPORT	MINIMAL REPORT	SATISFACTORY REPORT	ELABORATED REPORT
4	2%	28%	45%	24%	1%
8	--	12	34	49	5
11	1	12	27	55	5

FOOD ON THE FRONTIER; REASONS EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THEN AND TODAY.

GRADE	NONRATEABLE*	UNSATISFACTORY ANALYSIS	MINIMAL ANALYSIS	SATISFACTORY ANALYSIS	ELABORATED ANALYSIS
4	4%	55%	38%	2%	--
8	1	18	66	16	1
11	1	14	61	22	2

*Illegible, illiterate.

The "Appleby House" exercise represented little more than a sentence-combining task. Unsatisfactory papers mainly reported subjective reactions to the house as in: "It's a pretty weird house." Minimal papers relisted one or two facts; satisfactory papers cast most of the facts in a report format; and the best papers elaborated on the given facts to create a story.

About one-fourth of the 4th graders and more than one-half the 8th and 11th graders wrote satisfactory or elaborated reports.

In the "Food on the Frontier" task, students were given a short passage describing the kinds of foods eaten by pioneers. They were asked to discuss reasons explaining the differences between food then and food today. Given that salting and drying meat to preserve it was explained in the passage, popular reasons given were improved refrigeration, canning and freezing. Of course, improved transportation, methods of cooking, grocery stores and the invention of artificial preservatives were also mentioned.

Unsatisfactory papers included no reasons and tended to be digressions about food; minimal papers listed one or more reasons; satisfactory papers accompanied their reasons by at least sparse explanations of why their reasons might account for differences in food; and elaborated discussions explained the effects of those reasons in terms of the differences between food on the frontier and food today.

As shown in Table 1, more than one-half of the 4th graders were unable to do this task, but 80-85% of the 8th and 11th graders at least thought of and wrote down a reason, with 17% of 8th graders and 24% of the 11th graders providing some type of analytic discussion.

Persuasive Writing

The aim of persuasive writing is to influence others. Tasks ranged from giving advice to argument and refutation. Audiences were specified in each task and varied from informal and friendly to formal and opposed.

The results of several persuasive tasks are shown in Table 2. The "School Rule" task asked students to write the principal explaining a rule their school did not need and why. Unsupported letters included no reasons and minimally supported letters cited as reasons personal inconvenience or, "It's not fair" (or both). Adequately and extensively supported letters explained either why an alternative rule or no rule at all would be to the benefit of at least a group of students. At all three grades, most students were able to identify a situation they personally found irritating. However, only 4% of the 4th graders, 14% of the 8th graders and 21% of the 11th graders went beyond that and argued for their change on the basis of some benefit to the good of the school or recognized that the original reason for the rule should be addressed in proposing a new rule.

Table 2. NAEP 1983-84 Results on
Three Writing Tasks

SCHOOL RULE: WHAT RULE SCHOOL DOES NOT NEED AND WHY.

GRADE	NONRATEABLE*	UNSUPPORTED LETTER	MINIMALLY SUPPORTED LETTER	ADEQUATELY SUPPORTED LETTER	EXTENSIVELY SUPPORTED LETTER
4	2%	36%	58%	4%	--
8	1	15	71	13	1
11	2	8	69	19	2

RADIO STATION: CHANGE MIND OF STATION MANAGER SO YOU CAN VISIT.

GRADE	NONRATEABLE*	NONREFUTATION	MINIMAL REFUTATION	SATISFACTORY REFUTATION	ELABORATED REFUTATION
4	6%	47%	30%	16%	1%
8	--	28	38	30	4

BIKE LANE: CHANGE MIND OF CITY COUNCIL TO YOUR POINT OF VIEW.

GRADE	NONRATEABLE*	NONREFUTATION	MINIMAL REFUTATION	SATISFACTORY REFUTATION	ELABORATED REFUTATION
11	1%	32%	40%	25%	3%

*Illegible, illiterate.

In both "Radio Station" and "Bike Lane," students were given someone's position and asked to change the person's mind. In comparison to the "School Rule" task, results showed a more even distribution of responses across the levels of success. Very roughly, across all three grade levels, about one-third gave little or no evidence of recognizing the point of view of their audience, about one-third noted the concerns of their audience and about one-third addressed the concerns of their audience.

Imaginative Writing

The influence of television and movies was apparent in the students' "Ghost Stories," which included more "blood and gore" than actual ghosts. Yet, as shown in Table 3, the task had a smaller percentage of unsuccessful papers and, somewhat to the dismay of the readers, over half the 11th graders wrote detailed stories.

Table 3. NAEP 1983-84 Results on Two Imaginative Tasks

GHOST STORY: IMAGINATIVE NARRATIVE

GRADE	NONRATEABLE*	NO STORYTELLING	MINIMAL CONTROL	SATISFACTORY CONTROL	FULLY CONTROLLED
4	1%	13%	77%	8%	1%
8	1	7	53	35	3
11	2	3	42	48	5

CUBE: IMAGINATIVE DESCRIPTION

GRADE	NONRATEABLE*	NO DESCRIPTION	MINIMAL DESCRIPTION	SATISFACTORY DESCRIPTION	ELABORATED DESCRIPTION
4	4%	54%	39%	3%	--
8	1	33	47	15	4
11	1	30	50	17	2

*Illegible, illiterate.

In contrast to the "Ghost Story," which appeared to be very accessible, about one-half of the 4th graders and one-third of the 8th and 11th graders appeared to be stumped when asked to describe being part of a scene presented in a picture. (See Table 3.) Students were shown a picture of a box with several geometric windows, one with an eye peeking out. They were asked to imagine themselves in the picture and to give a lively and interesting description of the scene and tell how they felt. Although a number students described play houses, forts, castles and various kinds of prisons, less than one-fifth of the students at any age provided even sparsely detailed descriptions.

In summary, although students tended to perform best on the imaginative tasks and least well on the persuasive tasks, the results varied greatly with percentages of success for satisfactory papers ranging from 2% to 60%. This emphasizes the need to include a variety of tasks in any writing assessment or at least to select tasks with great care.

It should be emphasized that most of the students performed most tasks at some minimum rudimentary level, if not better, and that only small percentages of the papers, particularly at the older ages, were considered completely illiterate or illegible. However, fewer 11th graders than we might expect produced satisfactory papers, with improvements evidenced from 4th to 8th grade appearing more substantial than those from 8th to 11th grade. Generally, students did not produce thoughtful, elaborated writing and, depending on your definition of literacy, this may be a concern.

(Reports from the data collection staff and the empirical analysis of response patterns do not suggest that they wanted more time.)

Students Report on Their Writing Process

Writing should be a process involving planning, drafting, revising and editing, and NAEP included a substantial number of background questions asking students about what they do when they write.

Table 4 presents results to some questions about the prewriting or planning phase. About two-thirds of the students at all three grade levels purport to think before they write. However, only one-quarter to one-third think about either their subject or their audience or look up information in books. While slightly more claim to ponder their organization, it seems that students could use some specific guidance about what they should take into consideration in planning their papers.

Table 4. NAEP 1983-84 Background Questions,
Students Engage in Writing Process

PREWRITING

	MOST OF THE TIME		
	GRADE 4	GRADE 8	GRADE 11
THINK BEFORE WRITE	64%	62%	66%
WHAT SAY ABOUT SUBJECT	35	24	26
AUDIENCE	26	21	22
LOOK UP THINGS IN BOOKS	25	30	37
ORGANIZATION	40	39	48

The same may be true about further instruction on what to think about while drafting and revising. As shown in Table 5, a substantial percentage of students claim to revise. Yet, only one-quarter claim to do anything as drastic as moving a sentence and only about one-third add or delete information. About half do edit, changing words or correcting their spelling, punctuation or grammar.

Table 5. NAEP 1983-84 Background Questions,
Students Engage in Writing Process

DRAFTING/REVISING

	MOST OF THE TIME		
	GRADE 4	GRADE 8	GRADE 11
MAKE CHANGES			
AS WRITE	46%	48%	54%
AFTER WRITE	36	45	49
MOVE SENTENCES	25	18	23
ADD IDEAS/INFO	40	35	36
TAKE OUT PARTS	30	34	35
CHANGE WORDS	45	42	45
CORRECT SPELLING	59	56	56
CORRECT GRAMMAR	34	46	48
CORRECT PUNCTUATION	48	48	47

It should be noted that as reported in Table 6 below, student behavior reflects their perceptions of what teachers ask them to do and the comments they receive on their papers. Even in the 11th grade, the majority of teachers do not appear to routinely ask students to plan or revise their papers.

Table 6. NAEP 1983-84 Background Questions

INSTRUCTION

HOW OFTEN TEACHER ASKS YOU:

	MOST OF THE TIME			NEVER		
	4	8	11	4	8	11
MAKE NOTES/OUTLINES	16%	26%	40%	56%	22%	17%
TALK TO TEACHER	17	14	24	36	27	19
TALK TO CLASSMATES	13	13	18	50	37	32
REVISE BEFORE GRADED	17	29	41	47	25	15
REVISE AFTER GRADED	16	8	13	49	56	49

FEEDBACK

HOW OFTEN DOES TEACHER:

	MOST OF THE TIME			NEVER		
	4	8	11	4	8	11
MARK MISTAKES	44%	57%	67%	15%	9%	7%
COMMENT ON NEATNESS	45	31	14	15	22	39
COMMENT ON IDEAS	28	20	22	17	18	13

Only about one-quarter of the students report that their teachers usually comment on their ideas. However, neatness counts even at the 8th grade and one-half to two-thirds of the teachers usually mark mistakes.

It is not a surprise to find that students are not enthusiastic about writing and they find it of marginal utility. For example, about 12-15% of the students never like to write and almost half claim they would never do it if it were not for school. Only one-third think it is a good way to tell others your ideas and only about one-quarter feel the ability to write would usually get you a better job.

It seems apparent that if we want students to understand that writing is a powerful tool for communicating, teachers as the primary audience of students should start reacting to papers in terms of content as well as form. The conventions of written language are critical, but at best they can only enhance a communication. It is the accuracy and quality of the information, ideas and feelings expressed and the clarity with which they are presented that contribute the most to the value of any written material.

Profiles of Literacy; An Assessment of Young Adults

Mindful of the complexity of the task of assessing literacy, NAEP relied on panels of experts to help design its current assessment of young adults aged 21-25. A representative national sample of nearly 4,000 respondents are expected to participate in this household survey of reading, writing, computation and speaking skills to help determine the percentage of those who

- cannot speak English;
- are indeed "illiterate" or cannot use printed information;
- have limited, but useful, informational processing skills; and
- have mastered a full range of information processing skills that can be applied in most situations.

The 1985 NAEP Assessment will be a comprehensive look at the literacy skills of young Americans, who represent one-quarter of the nation's work force and include the highest proportion of the unemployed.

Extensive background questionnaires will help NAEP relate race/ethnicity, language(s) spoken at home, schooling, training, occupation and work experience as well as current reading practices to literacy skills.

Simulation tasks will measure the respondents' ability to use information in "real life" situations. For example, respondents will be asked to find and read articles in a specially designed newspaper created from actual newspaper articles.

Respondents will also be shown supermarket coupon ads, then told to match a shopping list with the coupons that could save the most money. They will also be asked to look up a subject in The World Almanac, to read it and discuss it.

In addition to these simulated tasks, items from NAEP's 1983-84 reading and writing assessment and an earlier Right to Read Study of adult literacy will provide important links with the previous surveys.

Finally, a comprehensive Oral Language Interview will be conducted, to determine how effectively young adults can communicate in spoken English.

The 1986 Assessment

The subject areas selected for the 1986 assessment of 3rd graders/9-year-olds, 7th graders/13-year-olds and 11th graders/17-year-olds are reading, mathematics, science and computers. Reading is a part of each biennial assessment to provide routine reporting of proficiency in this critical subject area and an important barometer of national educational progress. Frequent reading assessments will also enable NAEP to establish a firm trend in performance in this area. Also, with BIB spiralling student reading performance can be linked to the other subject areas in each assessment. This link will also enable NAEP to relate performance among different subject areas assessed in different years. Finally, reading will permit a routine analysis of alternating cohort samples. Mathematics is specified in the legislation as one subject area that must be assessed every five years. Given NAEP's biennial schedule and the fact that it was last assessed in 1981-82, it must be assessed again in 1986. Science and computers were selected as they are of current national concern and interest and as an integrated assessment "package" mathematics, science and computers complement one another very well.

In addition, as part of "The Foundations of Literacy Project" supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, NAEP will collaborate with the Educational Excellence Network to conduct an assessment of basic knowledge in U.S. History and Literature at 11th grade/age 17.